

New perspectives on Old Testament oneirocritic texts via the philosophy of dreaming

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Recourse to auxiliary disciplines has greatly contributed to the ways in which biblical scholars seek to elucidate various dimensions of meaning in textual constructions of dreams and dreaming in the Old Testament. The original contribution this article hopes to make to the ongoing research on associated oneirocritic topoi is to propose the so-called philosophy of dreaming as a potential dialogue partner to supplement already available perspectives within the multidisciplinary discussion. At present, there is no descriptive philosophical approach exclusively devoted to the identification and clarification of the folk-philosophical assumptions implicit in oneirocritic materials as conditions of their possibility. By way of comparative-philosophical commentary, the article features a brief introduction to the related research within Old Testament studies, an overview of the history and problems of the auxiliary subject, and an illustration of how the new approach might look when applied to texts involving 'oneirophany' (Gn 15:1–21, 20:3–6, 28:11–17 and 1 Ki 3:5–15). The study concludes with a few remarks on the limits of the proposal and suggestions for more extensive and in-depth future research in related and alternative areas.

Introduction

The representations of dreamworlds in the Old Testament texts, their contexts and their reception have been extensively researched in biblical scholarship. Oft-cited publications on the subject include, among others, those of Ehrlich (1953), Richter (1963:202–220), Zeitlin (1975:1–18), Seybold (1984:32–54), Westermann (1986:8–24), Husser (1999) and Lanckau (2012:n.p.). Existing interpretations of oneirocritic materials are found in a variety of research topoi, including under the rubrics of biblical Hebrew concepts, mantic wisdom, prophetic visions, divinatory practices, divine revelation, 'Hebrew thought' (psychology), intrareligious polemics, political ideology and so on (see, *inter alia*, Behrens 2002; Eissfeldt 1966:141–145; Jeffers 1996:1–23; Jeremias 1997:29–44).

Given the interdisciplinary nature of biblical criticism in general, research methodologies utilised in the interpretation of Old Testament perspectives on dreams and dreaming are of necessity always informed by the theories, currents and trends from at least one auxiliary field. These include approaching the concept of dreaming in the biblical corpus via agendas in, *inter alia*, linguistics, literary criticism, history, comparative religion, anthropology, psychology and theology (see, e.g. Clines 1995:94–136).

New developments in research on oneirocritic materials in the Old Testament have emerged not only from attempted justifications or critiques of existing theoretical assumptions, concepts, models or paradigms. Also, introducing a new approach in order to supplement, inform and correct available perspectives is equally important. In this regard, the recent return of (or turn to) philosophy in Old Testament scholarship has created a gap in the associated research on dreams in the context of Old Testament theology (Barr 2000; cf. Gericke 2012; Knierim 1995; Moore & Sherwood 2011). More specifically, within the latter discipline until now there has been no *philosophical* approach to possible associated second-order questions regarding textual representations of YHWH's appearances in the dreamworld.

In this study, it is proposed that the so-called philosophy of dreaming be considered as a potential supplement to the already available interdisciplinary perspectives on oneirocritic texts in the Old Testament. To be sure, *prima facie*, the very suggestion of any overt and direct involvement of philosophical concerns, concepts and categories is likely to appear problematic for various methodological and theological reasons (cf. Barr 1999:146–171). Given the hermeneutical fallacies often committed in the past when seeking to understand the Old Testament texts via anachronistic

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second-order philosophical frameworks, this is quite understandable. Be that as it may, it would be just as much of a fallacy to suppose that the non-philosophical nature of oneirocritic materials in the Old Testament rules out all philosophical perspectives on either a priori or a posteriori grounds as necessarily distortive of their historical sense (see, e.g. Gericke 2011:1–7; Knierim 1995:195–201).

The original contribution this article hopes to make to the ongoing research on dreams and dreaming in the Old Testament is therefore to introduce a novel philosophical approach that can be utilised for the clarification of neglected aspects and components of certain oneirocritic texts. The hypothesis predicts that while many of the problems in the contemporary philosophy of dreaming are unlikely to be transferrable to a historical and descriptive discussion of the contents of Old Testament oneirocritic texts, a critical adoption and adaptation of some of the related concepts, concerns and categories might allow the exegete to identify and clarify certain unwritten oneiric folk-philosophical presuppositions implicit therein. Moreover, these presuppositions must be postulated as conditions of possibility to account for and reconstruct the most fundamental and basic aspects of the conceptual backgrounds constitutive of dreamworlds in the texts. Clearly, such a task lies outside the scope of available (non-philosophical) interpretative methodologies.

The methodology utilised will be that of meta-theoretical reflection and comparative-philosophical commentary. The relevance of the research lies in the fact that without the indicated philosophical perspective on 'dreamworlds in the text' (adapting a second-order concept from various sections in Ricoeur 1984–1988), certain fundamental literary-historical dimensions of meaning present in their construction have not been attended to at all. The relation of the present study to existing research on dreams and dreaming is therefore to be seen as supplementary rather than as something intending to deny the insights already obtained in other approaches with different interests.

Given the limitations of space on the one hand and the depth of research on dreams and dreaming in both Old Testament studies and in philosophy on the other, the discussion to follow will be limited to (1) a brief introduction to the history and problems of the contemporary (Western and analytic) philosophy of dreaming; (2) a cursory illustration of how some of the associated concerns, concepts and categories of the proposed comparative-philosophical approach might operate in practice and with reference to a selection of oneirophanic texts, specifically texts featuring dreams in which YHWH appears to the dreaming subject (Gn 15:1–21, 20:3–6, 28:11–17 and 1 Ki 3:5–15); and (3) some final remarks on the limits of the new approach and a few considerations for future research.

As for limitations of scope in the application, though the findings of experimental research (e.g. neurological, see Stickgold & Walker 2009) are of interest to contemporary

philosophers of dreaming proper, this is not the case in the context of a descriptive philosophical approach to oneirophanic texts in the Old Testament. It is the assumption of this study that the world of the text does not contain any actual dream reports; only fictional constructs of idiosyncratic yet stereotyped dream scenes, the form and content of which were partly determined by literary convention, theological interests and scribal redactions (cf. Emmett 1978:445–450). These characteristics of dreams in the Old Testament have already been identified in various types of biblical criticism. Thus, while more purely scientific varieties of research will surely assist one to better understand contemporary views of dreams in general (and even if some dreams in the texts are somehow related to the experience of a historical person), the different ontological status of dreams in the world of the text as opposed to those in the world in front of the text settings limits the possibilities of comparative-philosophical restatement (see Walde 2001).

A brief history of the philosophy of dreaming

In many and various ways, second-order thinking about dreams and dreaming did not begin with Greek philosophy and is attested throughout the known history of religious writings on the subject. The story of oneirocritic literature in the ancient Near East 'before philosophy' has been well researched and will not be repeated here (see, e.g. Noegel 2001:45–71; Oppenheim 1956:174–354; Zgoll 2006). Given the objectives of the present study, the historical overview of this section is not able to do justice to all relevant philosophical contributions to the subject in a global and inclusive manner. As such, it is a reflection of the traditional and problematic ways in which the story has been recounted by some contemporary Western analytic philosophers specialising in the particular research (cf. Springett 2013:n.p.; Windt 2015:n.p.; cf. also Driesbach 2000:31–41).

In so-called pre-Socratic times (circa 624–546 BCE), various philosophical perspectives were available and concerned with the properties, relations and functions of dreams and dreaming in ways either reflective (e.g. Parmenides, Pythagoras) or dismissive (e.g. Heraclitus, Democritus) of earlier religious interpretations (see Barbera 2008:906–910).

Plato (427–347 BCE) and the writings associated with him sometimes assume the source of dreams to be divine communication, while at other times oneiromancy ends up being demystified through methodological naturalism, as in Socratic dialogues where interlocutors discuss parallels between dreaming and modes of perception in states of insanity (see Plato 1997, *Republic* V 476c–d, IX 571c–572c; 574d–576b; *Timaeus* XVI 45d3–46a4; *Theaetetus* 157–158).

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) viewed Plato's worries about proving 'where we are now' (in the waking world or in the dreamworld) as a trivial and esoteric concern and suggested that dreams are an epiphenomenon supervened by vital

organs functioning during sleep. Few people besides philosophers genuinely doubt the nature of their state of consciousness in ordinary, everyday life (see Aristotle 1986, *On Dreams* 462a5).

Pyrrho (365–275 BCE) and those influenced by him often made use of dreaming as analogy in objections to arguments involving common-sense appeals to what seems to be indubitable empirical knowledge (see Diogenes Laertius 1991, *DL* 9.61–116; Sextus Empiricus 1987, *PH* 1.19).

Augustine (1991; *Confessions*, Book X; Chapter 30) contributed to the history of the philosophy of dreaming by turning the attention from metaphysics and epistemology to ethics and by reflecting in light of his religious beliefs on the question of whether the wrongful acts committed in dreams count as sin (eventually concluding that they do not because the dreaming subject is passive and oneiric obscenities simply prove our inherently depraved nature).

De Montaigne (1996 [1580]: II, 12, 445/179), in his *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, attempted an inversion of the traditional view by suggesting that illusions and delusions experienced in the everyday world outside the dream should, epistemologically speaking, enjoy a greater priority in the list of possible and actual worries about the weird and wonderful alternative nocturnal states of consciousness.

Rene Descartes (2008 [1641]: Med. 1, AT 7:19; and also 3, AT 7:39–40; 6, AT 7:77), in the first (as well as the third and sixth) of his famous *Meditations*, constructed a thought experiment demonstrating the impossibility of attaining epistemological certainty regarding either being presently (or ever) awake in light of the fact that reasoning in dreams and outside them can be quite rational (logically valid) without having any reference to anything empirical (logically sound).

Thomas Hobbes (1985[1651]: *Leviathan*, Part 1, Chapter 2) tried to go beyond the contemporary trends in epistemological-metaphysical paranoia in claiming that while Cartesian dreamtime may be populated with rational subjects, the emergent properties of its relations involve logical absurdities of a kind absent from our ordinary everyday sensory experiences.

John Locke (1997 [1690]: Book 4, Chapter 2 §2) joined Hobbes in the quest for discerning the essential real-world properties never instantiated in the dreamworld and ended up identifying the determinative factor to be the variable nature of perceived physical pain experienced in different mental states.

George Berkeley (1944 [1710]: *PC* I.18) concluded that because the dreamworld involves perception of input to the five senses without corresponding external causal *relata*, one cannot appeal to spatiotemporal coherence in ordinary everyday waking consciousness to prove that physical reality is really all that much more than ‘the stuff (day)dreams are made of’.

David Hume (2000 [1739]:1.1.1.1), in the *Treatise on Human Nature*, sought to locate dreamland in the twilight zone between affects and cognitions given the anomaly that arises in any philosophy of mind assuming dreams to be both unoriginal combinations of concepts already possessed (i.e. as ideas) and the consequence of non-logical effects produced by prior sensory stimuli (as impressions).

Gottfried Leibniz (1956 [1881]:177–178), in the *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, Vol. I, concluded that the extemporaneous appearance of visual phenomena as an emergent property of the dreamworld can be considered to be epistemologically interesting rather than psychologically threatening.

Hegel (2007 [1827–1828]:6), in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit*, viewed dreams both as involving a form of primitive prelogical regression and as a transrational overcoming of the subject-object dichotomy. The latter was meant in the sense of the dreaming self, being both the unwitting cause and experienced effect of the dreamworld, thereby exemplifying the dialectical logic where all apparent opposites are unified over time.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1996 [1878]:14), in the fifth aphorism of the first section of *Human, All-Too-Human*, suggested that dreaming is the source of human religious philosophies based on metaphysical dualism, that is, the belief in the existence of a second world somewhere outside the one experienced in everyday life. Because both deceased ancestors and unfamiliar people are encountered in the dreamworld, it seemed warranted to populate reality as such with things like souls, the afterlife and a god in the form of an immaterial being abiding in a ‘spiritual’ dimension.

Bertrand Russell (1914:69) pointed out that, logically, the rejection of the dreamworld as less than real is itself based on the so-called subject-object metaphysical distinction present in the use of scientific language, assuming a radical difference in the ontological status of physical and mental states (and doing so when in fact dreams only ever occur in reality; cf. also Russell 1948:149–150).

Ludwig Wittgenstein (2002:111, 676), in his book *On Certainty*, offered a deflationary view of the associated epistemological scepticism involved in believing one could be dreaming when one is actually awake. There is no necessary link between the stating of such a position and how things are. Consequently, arguments that appeal to dreams to warrant doubt about what is real, though irrefutable, are senseless, if for no other reason than the realisation that there is no way of settling the matter conclusively either way.

Norman Malcolm (1959:55) sought to question the taken-for-granted assumption that we can be sure that what we recall as our dreams actually corresponds to the original oneiric experience (following Wittgenstein 1953:415 part 2, §vii). One therefore cannot meaningfully ask when, during the time one was asleep, one had a particular dream one

recalls on waking up. This implies that our concept of dreaming is based on how we talk about our dreams from residual memory, not on a phenomenological analysis of the content of the dreams themselves.

More recently, contemporary analytic philosophers of dreaming have shown an increasing interest in discussing puzzles arising from the findings in experimental research on dreams in laboratory settings. The latter has led to new approaches to traditional questions regarding, among others, external world scepticism, dreaming and ethics, dreams and consciousness, the psychological and biological function of dreams (or lack thereof), the relation between dreams and mental illness. Various philosophical disciplines and topics are included in the ongoing dialogue involved, including ontology, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of biology, philosophy of psychology and many others (see Barrett & McNamarra 2007a, 2007b, 2007c; Dennett 1976:151–171; Flanagan 2000; Sutton 2009:522–542.).

Folk-philosophical assumptions in some oneirophanic texts

It is now time to consider how a selective and critical adoption and adaptation of some of the second-order concepts, concerns and categories in the philosophy of dreaming might be applied to the context of oneirophanic texts in the Old Testament. In the present context, 'oneirophany' is a self-invented neologism adopted to represent what has previously been classified as (a subtype of) 'theophany', 'visions of God', 'message dreams' in both incidental nocturnal experiences and in rituals involving 'oneiromancy' and/or 'incubation' (see Husser 1999:123–138). To this end, a dreamworld in the text will be assumed to fall under the extension of oneirophany if the following individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions are met:

1. The human character is explicitly indicated as the dreaming subject.
2. The character of the deity appears within the world of the dream.
3. There is verbal communication between the deity and dreaming subject during the dreamtime.
4. The nature of religious language used in constructing the dreamworld in the text seems univocal.

To be sure, the identifying of members of the extension of oneirophanic texts will be influenced by different possible interpretations of the textual data allegedly meeting the criteria outlined above. Yet, all four requirements considered, it would seem that there are only a small number of dreamworlds in the texts of the Old Testament within the logical constitution of the concept of oneirophany as thus structured along classical or (intensional) classical definitional lines. In other words, dreams assumed to be sent by the deity are not included if a projection of YHWH himself is not encountered within the dreamtime. Also, for the purpose of cursive philosophical commentary practical in the context of a journal article, the remarks in this section will be limited to

four familiar oneirophanic texts (Gn 15:1–21; Gn 20:3–6; Gn 28:1–17; 1 Ki 3:5–15). In each case the focus is on what appears to be the implicit folk-philosophical assumptions of the text under consideration and that are in some way related to the philosophical concept, concern and/or category in analytic philosophy of dreaming providing the perspective from which it is read.

Folk-ontological assumptions in the oneirophany of Genesis 15:1–21: As a condition of possibility for the construction of this particular oneirophanic dreamworld in the text, one must postulate the implicit folk-philosophical assumption of a very specific type of external world scepticism of a rather different sort than that encountered in Pyrrhic or Cartesian questions. The request for a sign with an epistemic function is both relevant and not uncommon in the Old Testament in general. The desire for certainty in Abraham is expressed by his dream persona in such a manner that it would qualify to be classed as a weak version of verificationism. This is evident from the idea that a request is made to affirm via ritual and promise the identity conditions of the indicated salvific events in both the dream and waking worlds in the text. The consequent action of the divine subject within oneirophanic phenomenal experience is thereby seen as having the logical status of a truth maker for the propositional content of the deity's own description of future events beyond the dreamtime.

Folk-ethical assumptions in the oneirophany of Genesis 20:3–6: In this example, a dreamworld is constructed in which the deity takes on the character of Abimelech in light of his extramarital relations with Sarah. A condition of possibility for such a state of affairs to obtain involves operating folk-philosophical assumptions about the relation between ethics and dreaming. More specifically, these assumptions appear to involve a form of deontological import with reference to the morality believed to apply even to lucid dreaming (again, not in so many words). Because the dreaming subject (human) is assumed not to be passive as moral agent, it is constructed with a duty imposed irrespective of other considerations. The dreaming subject is also assumed to be partly in possession of free will and therewith of the associated private moral intent, despite the metaphysical determinism implicit in the divine subject's revelation of what appears to be a seemingly inevitable future state of affairs in the waking state. Though no attempt is made to resolve the moral problems related to the associated metaphysical assumptions, a compatibilist view or soft determinism was not assumed to be problematic.

Folk-ontological assumptions in the oneirophany of Genesis 28:1–17: Our next test case features the oneirophany involving the well-known story of Jacob's Ladder. With reference to the ontology of dreams, the following observations appear warranted. Firstly, in the folk-philosophical assumptions of this oneirophany there is implied to be a transworld identity present in the form of mereological underlap between some objects in the

dreamtime and their external world counterparts (despite different identity conditions). Secondly, there is not assumed to be any absolute distinction (as there is nowadays) between the ontological status of the dreamworld and that of the real (waking) world; only phenomenal differences in awareness of the particular intentional states as their contrast becomes evident once the dream is over. Thirdly, the whatness of things encountered in oneiric experiences and the categories of being used to classify them in the context of oneirophany are assumed to be adequately given in the univocal language of their world-in-the-text representation. Symbolic elements in dreams with greater metaphorical content as well as theological concerns with the dreamworld as self-gratifying imagination or false testimony, as were associated with false prophecy in other Old Testament oneirocritic texts, are absent from oneirophanies of this type.

Folk-psychological assumptions in the oneirophany of 1 Kings 3:5–15: In the fourth and final example, we encounter the literary construction of an oneirophanic dream in which YHWH appears to Solomon, asking what it is that he (YHWH) could give him (the king). As regards the underlying folk-philosophical (as opposed to other theological and political) assumptions in this text, one that is of interest concerned the question of whether or not dreams have meaning (in the sense of teleology, not semantics). From the details of the encounter in the dreamworld, the following could be inferred in this regard. Firstly, a folk-psychological theory aware of the extent to which the manifest content of oneirophanic dreams can be expressions of wish fulfilment is clearly evident in the specific possibilities with which Solomon is presented and from which he was presumed to be able (or likely) to choose from (but declines to do so). Secondly, the fact that Solomon's character's ability to suppress its will to live and power to satisfy his will to wisdom (here as political discernment inclusive of but not limited to moral discernment) assumes that oneirophanic dreams can be expressive of self-knowledge. Thirdly, on the assumption that dreamworlds in the text involving YHWH are also a revelation of what is hidden in the recesses of the human heart, this text implies that oneirophanic dreams could have a putative epistemic purpose in providing information also for the deity who in non-perfect being theologies in the text (as here) is not assumed to have direct and immediate cognitive access to all facts about the world.

Limits of the study and proposals for further research

The preceding philosophical comments provide a glimpse of what the descriptive philosophical idiom related to the associated second-order concepts, concerns and categories from the philosophy of dreaming could involve. It is not assumed that the texts discussed are thereby exhausted of their folk-philosophical content or that the particular descriptions of the latter are the only ones possible. Moreover, clearly the texts themselves do not presuppose an overt

interest or awareness of these issues, which, as conditions of their possibility, preceded the construction of the oneirophanic dreamworlds. These findings cannot be combined to produce some sort of systematic Old Testament philosophy of dreaming and are not of any direct relevance to contemporary philosophical debates on the subject other than being of historical interest.

These findings and those of other available approaches are not mutually exclusive. If traditional concerns were not addressed or problems solved, it is because the focus of the new approach lies elsewhere. Hence, it cannot be expected to attend to the same issues linguists, literary critics, historical critics and Old Testament theologians are interested in. The opposite is also true: available approaches do not and cannot discuss these elements, which is why the particular philosophical approach adds to available knowledge of the world in the text by attending to more fundamental components from which it is constructed and that derive from the unwritten folk-philosophical assumptions taken for granted in the construction of the dreamworlds with an agenda that lay elsewhere, whether we see this as religious, political or otherwise.

The non-realist approach to the ontological status of the oneirophanic dreams implying they are considered without a belief in a world-outside-the-text referent will also not find favour among conservative readers. Even if they agree that it is possible and even important to engage the oneirocritic texts in this philosophical manner, they might beg to differ as to the ontological status of the non-philosophical contents of the oneirophanic materials in relation to the author thereof. This is not detrimental to the argument of this study, because the primary objective was the proposing of a new theoretical framework, auxiliary approach and interpretative methodology. The reader's philosophy of religion is therefore still theirs to involve, however that may work.

Conclusion

In this study it was demonstrated that a critical selection and adaptation of some of the second-order concepts, concerns and categories of the so-called philosophy of dreaming can offer a heuristically functional supplement to existing linguistic, literary, historical, social-scientific, psychological and theological or ideological-critical interpretations of oneirocritic materials in the Old Testament. The ways in which the new descriptive philosophical approach can add to our understanding of the world in the text was shown to be found in the particular foci it offers the Old Testament scholar interested in identifying and clarifying the associated unwritten folk-philosophical assumptions that must be postulated as conditions of possibility for the dreamworlds in the text to be constructed the way they were (or to be part of that world at all). As such, the introductory overview and remarks presented here can be seen as having laid the groundwork for more in-depth and extensive related future research.

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Competing interests

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